

On 42nd Street

Artists' Visions

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

September 26–December 5, 1984



RICHARD ESTES *Welcome to 42nd Street*, 1968 Oil on masonite, 32 x 24 inches Collection of Louis K. and Susan Pear Meisel

Since the turn of the century, 42nd Street has symbolized the tumultuous cacophony of the urban experience. Like the city itself, the street both seduces and repulses with its extremes of the stately and the sordid, the genial and the brutal. Its patchwork of signs, billboards, and gaudy flashing lights proved fertile subjects for the twenty-three artists represented here. Their work reflects the evolution of both art and urbanity: a chronicle of the street that is the heart of New York City, and of the aesthetic sensibilities that have been the center of twentieth-century American art.

By 1902, when Childe Hassam painted his impressionistic *Broadway at 42nd Street*, the area had already changed from a residential district into a focus of theatrical activity. It was the home of eight elegant theaters, including Oscar Hammerstein's Victoria, which was topped by the Paradise Roof Garden—a fantasy world of ponds, streams, and a rock grotto inhabited by monkeys. In 1901, the Roof Garden's turn-of-the-century elegance and fashionable patrons were depicted by the noted Ashcan School painter William J. Glackens. More typical of the Ashcan School's preoccupation with the grittier aspects of city life is Ernest Lawson's *The Old Grand Central* (c. 1910). Viewed from the train yards now located beneath Park Avenue, the depot of the original terminal looms in the distance through a miasma of soot and snow.

By the 1920s, the innovative use of neon to illuminate Broadway marquees and advertisements, represented here in John Marin's watercolor *Broadway Night* (1929), created a visual ambience unlike any in the world. Marin's work reflects other innovations as well: the attempt of artists of the period to translate European modernism—Cubism, Fauvism, and Futurism, in particular—into a distinctly American idiom.

East of Broadway, 42nd Street was transformed by another phenomenon that marked New York City's emergence as the ultimate twentieth-century metropolis—the skyscraper. The Chrysler Building, the epitome of the modern skyscraper at its completion in 1929, embodied the spirit of the future in its Art Deco facade and automotive details. The building is the focal point of Russell Patterson's set design *Falling off the Wagon, Ballyhoo* for the musical review *Ballyhoo of 1932*. Revelers enjoying the heady essence of New York's night life are shown on 42nd Street, which itself spins in drunken delight, its buildings, signs, and skyscrapers fragmented in the futuristic style.

Although the street's greatest buildings were constructed during the Depression, by the 1930s New York's theater industry had begun to move northward, leaving its architecturally sublime theaters

to the movies and burlesque houses. By the late thirties, the structures that had housed the legendary spectacles of the era's "legit" producers—the Ziegfeld *Follies*, Earl Carroll's *Vanities*, even vaudeville at its home, the Palace Theatre—were papered over with tear sheets and posters advertising B-movies for as little as 25 cents admission. In his painting *Times Square* (1936), Theodore Roszak portrays both the glitter and desolation of a street that had begun its slow yet relentless decline.

The early 1940s saw a brief revitalization of Times Square. But when the postwar recession hit, movies and girlie shows again became the prime attraction. John Russell described the effect of this situation on art: "Once the movies got hold of New York as one of the all-time great subjects, something of the heart and energy went out of the paintings that dealt with the same material."

It was not until the 1960s that a new generation of artists was inspired by the seedy passion of the street. Working in various styles, these artists portrayed the everyday life of 42nd Street. Others conceived of projects, murals, and monuments designed to transform the street with their physical presence. The subject of Richard Estes' Superrealist work *Welcome to 42nd Street* is a porno-house—the Victory Theatre, once Hammerstein's Republic Theatre. There is an ironic juxtaposition between the stately neoclassical architecture and the garish marquee that welcomes visitors to "The World's Greatest Movie Center." Jane Dickson also depicts the Times Square area, where she lives and works. With the detached pathos of Edward Hopper, Dickson paints the denizens of peep shows, the runaways, and the prostitutes who inhabit the streets. Christo proposed wrapping One Times Square like a package in 1968; and nine years later, Richard Haas painted a replica of its original facade on the Crossroads Building (now demolished) across the street.

Today, 42nd Street can be viewed as either a cultural oasis or an urban blight. While plans for the redevelopment of West 42nd Street as well as proposals for razing the turn-of-the-century theaters are debated, East 42nd Street continues to flourish with new buildings such as the Philip Morris headquarters which houses this museum. Yet whatever the nature of its next evolutionary stage, it is unlikely that the street as a whole will ever completely lose its iconographic power. Forty-second Street, with its titillating glimpses of street life and high life, will probably always remain, in the eyes of artists, a rich and colorful microcosm of the city.

Checklist

Dimensions are in inches and, in the case of drawings and prints, refer to sheet size unless noted as sight (measured within the frame or mat opening). Height precedes width precedes depth.

Christo (b. 1935)

Packed Building (Project for 1 Times Square; Allied Chemical Tower), 1968

Collaged photographs with pencil, charcoal, map, and tape (photographs by Harry Shunk), 15 x 10

Collection of Jeanne-Claude Christo

Chryssa (b. 1933)

Fragment for the Gates to Times Square, 1966

Neon and Plexiglas, 81 x 34½ x 27½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Howard and Jean Lipman 66.135

Howard Cook (1901–1980)

Times Square Sector (Times Square Section), 1930

Etching, 12 x 9½

National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of Barbara Latham

Robert Cottingham (b. 1938)

Money, 1972

Acrylic on paper, 10½ x 10½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Norman Dubrow 81.28.2

Jane Dickson (b. 1952)

Nude Revue, 1983

Oil stick on canvas, 89 x 37

Collection of the artist, courtesy Delahunty Gallery, New York

Fritz Eichenberg (b. 1901)

Broadway (City Lights), 1934

Wood engraving on paper, 7¾ x 5¾

Associated American Artists, New York

Richard Estes (b. 1936)

Welcome to 42nd Street, 1968

Oil on masonite, 32 x 24

Collection of Louis K. and Susan Pear Meisel

William J. Glackens (1870–1938)

Hammerstein's Roof Garden, c. 1901

Oil on canvas, 30 x 25

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 53.46

Red Grooms (b. 1937)

Girls, Girls, Girls, 1975

Mixed media, canvas, and fabric, 113 x 186 x 9

Marlborough Gallery, New York

Richard Haas (b. 1936)

Maquette for Crossroads Building, Times Square, New York, 1979

Gouache on board, 71 x 56

Brooke Alexander, Inc., New York

Childe Hassam (1859–1935)

Broadway at 42nd Street, 1902

Oil on canvas, 26 x 22

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Bequest of Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot (1876–1967)

John Held, Jr. (1889–1958)

Cityscape with Chrysler Building, 1934

Watercolor on paper, 14 x 20

Collection of Mr. Herbert McLaughlin

Earl Horter (1881–1940)

The Chrysler Building Under Construction, 1931

Ink and watercolor on paper, 20¼ x 14¾

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mrs. William A. Marsteller 78.17

Alex Katz (b. 1927)

Three studies for *Times Square Billboard*, 1976

Oil on paper, 16 x 10 each

Private collection

Joyce Kozloff (b. 1942)

Proposal for *Grand Central Subway Floor*, 1982

Watercolor and gouache on paper, 37½ x 30½ (sight)

Collection of Jane A. Rubin

Ernest Lawson (1873–1939)

The Old Grand Central, c. 1910

Oil on canvas, 17 x 21

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur G. Altschul

John Marin (1870–1953)

Broadway Night, 1929

Watercolor on paper, 21½ x 26¾

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Alfred Stieglitz Collection

Mary Miss (b. 1944)

Model for *42nd Street Project*, 1981

Metal and wood, 14 x 23 x 46

Collection of the artist, courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

Axometric drawing for *42nd Street Project*, 1981

Ink on mylar, 42¼ x 54

Collection of the artist, courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929)
*Proposed Colossal Monument for Times
Square, New York: Banana, Lying
Position*, 1965
Crayon and watercolor on paper, 18 x 29
Collection of the artist

Russell Patterson (b. 1896)
Falling off the Wagon, Ballyhoo, 1932
Ink on paper, 8¾ x 20
Graham Modern, New York

Theodore Roszak (1907–1981)
Times Square, 1936
Oil on canvas, 47¼ x 59¼
Collection of Sara Jane Roszak

Saul Steinberg (b. 1914)
New York Skyline, 1966
Watercolor, ink, and pastel on paper,
28 x 22
Collection of Chermayeff and Geismar
Associates, Inc., New York

Mark Tobey (1890-1976)
Times Square (New York Patterns),
1944–48
Tempera on wood, 11¹¹/₁₆ x 11¹¹/₁₆
Collection of Aaron B. Shraybman

The works in this exhibition were selected by Susan Lubowsky, Branch Director, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris. Special thanks are extended to Lisa Phillips, Head, Branch Museums, and Associate Curator, who originally conceived of the idea, and to interns Ann Kulleseid and Suzanne Shepard, who helped with the research and preparation of this publication.

Funding for the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris is provided by Philip Morris Incorporated.

The background recording—"Excerpts of 42nd Street," from *New York City* (Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Cologne, 1984)—was commissioned by WDR-3-Hörspielstudio, Klaus Schoning, and produced at the Electronic Music Studio of Stockholm by Richard Kostelanetz, with technical collaboration by John David Fullemann and Tomas Hammer.

Original period music is provided by Bernard Strassberg in alternating sequence with this piece.

Free lunchtime events

New England Bach Festival Ensemble

October 9, 1984, at 12:30 pm

Three lectures on the social, theatrical, and architectural history of 42nd Street:

Brendan Gill, writer and drama critic of *The New Yorker* and
Chairman Emeritus, New York Landmarks Conservancy
October 11, 1984, at 12:30 pm

Dr. Gerard Wolfe, Professor of Continuing Education,
New York University
October 18, 1984, at 12:30 pm

Kent Barwick, President, The Municipal Art Society of
New York
October 23, 1984, at 12:30 pm

Films on 42nd Street

Independent Filmmakers view the street
October 30, 1984, at 12:30 pm

Admission to the lectures and films is by reservation only.
(212) 878-2453

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris
120 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Gallery Hours

Monday-Saturday 11:00 am-6:00 pm
Thursday until 7:30 pm

Sculpture Court Hours

Monday-Saturday 7:30 am-9:30 pm
Sunday 11:00 am-7:00 pm
Free Admission

Gallery Talks

Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 12:30
Tours by appointment
For information call (212) 878-2550

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